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### Review of Low Carbon Communities

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**Fraser Stewart (2013) Review of: “Peters, M., Fudge, S. & Jackson, T. [eds.] (2012) *Low carbon communities: Imaginative approaches to combating climate change locally*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.” In *Sociology*. Vol. 46 (6)**

At the time of writing this review the world’s political leaders and scientists are meeting in Rio de Janeiro for the latest Earth Summit. This marks as significant the release in paperback of this important edited collection. In the twenty years since the first UN Conference on Environment and Development, also held in Rio, the world has experienced ever-greater crises. These include the current global financial crisis, fears over food security, the price of oil, degradation of ecosystems and extreme weather patterns, attributed to anthropogenic climate change. Each crisis calls into question the ability of an expanding human population to live sustainably on the planet. As such, they are issues that demand the urgent attention not only of governments, but the world’s citizens too. It is here that the notion of ‘community’ has emerged to be of interest to policy actors, scholars and grassroots activists. However, while the concept of community has a long and varied history, it remains a contested term with different definitions and meanings competing over the terrain. Based on normative ideals of what a community ‘is’ or ‘ought’ to be, community has emerged as one particular way people might be mobilised to take action at the local level to transition toward a sustainable future.

This book focuses on low carbon communities to consider the potential and limitations of community action as a way of combating climate change. It does this by attempting to move beyond traditional responses to social-environmental relations that have been based on weak models of behavioural change. By collecting together multiple examples of how climate change is being combated in different contexts, the editors point toward the potential of social norms and localism as helping explain the past, current and future configurations of society. A central issue explored is the governance of climate change, which is problematized as emerging out of particular historical and contemporary trajectories. In their introduction the editors acknowledge a conundrum over the opportunities and challenges of community-based action on climate change. On the one hand they suggest that it offers a meaningful way for global targets on

greenhouse gas emissions to be met and social relations to be renewed, but on the other hand, they also claim this challenges the social organization of modern economies that are often at odds with wider social structures and constraints. The book will therefore ignite the sociological imagination of anyone interested in the social dimensions of climate change policy and governance.

The format of the collection comprises fifteen substantive chapters divided between three sections. There is not enough room to review of all of these here, so I will only pick out a couple of personal highlights. The three chapters that make up the first part use empirical studies to explore theoretical and intellectual understandings of communities and social change. I was particularly taken with Peters' first chapter, who skillfully outlines the challenge of climate change for policymakers and the role of community, which is defined as multiple, complex, contested and elusive. Despite the difficulties outlined, the author asserts the power of community-oriented action to evoke social change, and in doing so, he recognises one cannot approach community merely as a homogenous collection of actors all pulling in the same direction. Rather they should be understood as collectivities or webs of interconnected actors interacting with other members of the community in complex ways. The second part of the collection is longer, with five chapters exploring the challenges for climate change policy in transitioning to low carbon economies. Here various models of local level governance, decision-making and economic frameworks are presented. Of particular note is Seyfang's chapter on the new economics agenda for sustainable consumption and applying these to the exchange of goods and services in communities, not using money, but alternative mechanisms to build local resilience and social capital. The arguments made are refreshing for thinking about community in a way that moves beyond the tendency for social scientists to be very good at pointing out problems, but often short on providing solutions. The final part of the collection is more substantial still, comprising seven chapters. Here numerous models and case studies are presented that demonstrate the opportunities and challenges for community-based action on climate change. Each model has been selected for its novelty and potential for delivering action at the local level. While there is plenty of critical analysis to be

found throughout the book, there is a tendency for some contributions to lean toward an overly optimistic or simplistic view of community that seems to be inadequate. Nevertheless, in setting out the challenge for society as both urgent and complex, the editors have compiled a collection that is effective at introducing a range of important issues that will be of interest to policymakers, scholars and practitioners alike.